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Open Prisons:

A Governor's Perspective

Sara Pennington is Governor of HMP Standford Hill and is interviewed by Dr Ben Crewe who is Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

BC: How has the role of being a governor of an open prison changed since you've been in post?

SP: I came into post just over a year ago, which was about the time when all the changes started to snowball, and I think the role has changed in terms of we're much more centre of stage, high-profile. I think in the past the open prisons were a bit overlooked. And now I think it's recognised — the importance of the work that we do and the level of the risk that's being managed.

BC: Can you say a bit about what it's been like for you to govern an open prison at a time of increased scrutiny and political attention?

SP: Well, we've been under quite considerable media spotlight. The staff have remained very professional, and when dealing with risk we've had to stay focused, and not be pressured in becoming too risk-averse. And sometimes there will be failings, so we just need to ensure we always follow due process, and that decisions are always reasonable and defensible. But as I said, while there's been more scrutiny, and we've got a higher profile, that's actually been a positive thing, in that the value of the work that we do and the risk that we're carrying is now fully recognised. Personally, I find governing an open prison very rewarding as it's at this stage in an offender's journey that you can really make a difference through the right preparation prior to release.

BC: And what's it like for you personally to live with risk. Do you take the worries home with you?

SP: Managing an open prison is very different to managing a closed prison. It's just as demanding, but in different ways. As you say, you are carrying a huge amount of risk without the comforting source of physical barriers such as a fence to confine people. So yes, sometimes it does play on your mind, and when you're signing off risk assessments, there is a huge amount of responsibility there. But you just have to manage risk sensibly and not be risk-averse, because that's not what risk management is about. And home ... I am always on call, particularly at the weekends. [And] if people are going to fail [to return from temporary release] you normally find out on a Saturday evening, just when you're about to go out, you know, it does encroach on your personal life. But that's the job you signed up for, and that's fine with me.

BC: Can you tell me how you've managed all of the changes to ROTL?

SP: There's been a huge amount of hard work and commitment from the staff. A lot of the changes that have been brought in have been with immediate effect, which has required a new way of thinking, but very quickly. And there's been a big increase in the workload, and we've really had to think in depth about risk management, at a much higher level than we've been accustomed to. And I think that's involved a lot of skilling up and training of staff. Previously we'd have the ROTL risk assessment board, and it might take five minutes for an offender. But now it's truly multi-disciplinary and it can take at least half an hour per prisoner. But what's really added to the value and the quality of the work has been the seconded probation staff. Because they much better understand risk in the community, and they've been able to share their knowledge with us. We've also had to communicate the changes very carefully with offenders, because with the changes that have come in there have been a lot of rumours, so we've had to be very mindful not to destabilise the prison, and the risk of increasing absconds. So for example we produce a weekly newsletter for prisoners, so we can communicate the ROTL changes in a digestible form, and respond to their questions. We also have group sessions for offenders, to answer their queries individually when the new instructions come out, so that's been a very important part of managing all these changes. It's all about changing the culture: no longer is ROTL a right, no longer is it presumptive. It's now a privilege, so communicating that to both prisoners and staff has been very important. Things such as a town visit, or a home leave, no longer exist. A prisoner has to submit a detailed plan for each resettlement day release, or release on overnight resettlement, and that has to clearly link with the purpose of their ROTL, to the sentence plan, and a resettlement goal. And that's been a big change.

BC: Have you had any kickback from prisoners? Has there been much hostility to all of the changes that you've brought about?

SP: Obviously, prisoners are not very happy, because, as I said, they feel that this is their right, [i.e.] they arrive at open prison and they can go out on day release, that's been customary practice. But personally

we've not had hostility. I think they understand that it's come from ministers, and I think they also understand the reason why, they understand that all these changes have been brought in following the three serious cases of reoffending the summer before last. That triggered the ROTL review. And they also understand what happened in May, when we had a high-profile offender go out and commit an armed robbery. So they understand very much why we've brought in these changes. That's not to say they like them [but] personally we haven't had hostility.

BC: What about staff? Have they embraced these changes? How easy have they found it to move towards a different system?

SP: It's been a huge amount of work, and the way in which staff have adapted and taken on board these changes is really commendable, in particular for the offender supervisors that were previously operational senior officers, who have now taken on the dual role of being offender supervisor and senior officer. In Standford Hill many of them had spent most of their career just on the landings, and to be expected to learn how to fill in an OASYS, to understand about all of the OM processes, that's a lot of work for them to do and yet now they are much more confident, and many say that they get more satisfaction from that aspect of their role, rather than the work on the wings. But it has been a huge cultural change for them too.

BC: Can you say something about how your population has changed as a result of some of the recent policy changes?

SP: Well I think that the population of open prisons has changed in general over recent years, and we have more indeterminate sentence prisoners, which reflects the population in prisons as a whole. So we have many more serious, violent offenders. In terms of how the ROTL changes have affected our population, there is now the rule that if an offender has previously absconded or failed on ROTL during the current sentence they can no longer be in an open prison. So

some people have had to go back to closed, and we no longer get those offenders coming to an open prison. Also, because of the backlog of OASYS in closed prisons, we have had some spaces, and we've had an influx of prisoners serving less than twelve months, because they don't need to have an OASYS document completed, and that's not really the population that we cater for, because there's not a lot that we can do for offenders who are serving less than twelve months.

BC: Does it feel as though the purpose of the open estate is changing, and if so can you say something about what you think the role of the open prison now is?

SP: I hope it doesn't change the purpose of an open prison. Personally I feel the purpose of an open prison is really to resettle offenders who are of higher risk, and have spent a longer time in custody, because they need more opportunity to reintegrate effectively with the community. And there is evidence that shows that if a lifer, for example, is released from an open prison they're three times less likely to reoffend than if they're released from a closed prison. But obviously with the new rules we have to manage risk much more closely. I think that's a good thing, but it's a question of getting the balance right between protecting the public and enabling resettlement. I think we need to embed the new changes and not lose sight of that.

One other thing worth acknowledging is that the benchmark for open prisons has actually reflected the increase in workload that the changes in ROTL have brought about. We're much better resourced in the OMU in terms of offender supervisors and have additional prison officers for escorts and spot checks on offenders out on temporary release. We've also got an extra Custodial Manager, more psychology input, caseworkers and seconded probation officers. Whereas in the rest of the estate there's generally been reductions in staff numbers, our benchmark has increased the level of staffing.